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Charles Develennes, *Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, D'Holbach, Diderot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). 230pp. ISBN: 978 1 4744 7843 4.

How best to study the development of modern atheism? In *Positive Atheism*, Charles Develennes argues that while others have sought to do so from the perspective of those who accused others of atheism, there is instead “an obvious alternative that has at least equal validity and coherence: starting with the atheists” (3). Accordingly, this book offers a study of 18th century atheism from the perspective of atheists themselves. Or rather, from the perspective of four thinkers who took atheism to be a positive doctrine in its own right, with important social, ethical, and political implications. These implications are the beating heart of this book.

Positive Atheism consists of an introduction followed by 5 chapters. Each of the first 4 is devoted to one of the four thinkers named in the book’s subtitle—Pierre Bayle, Jean Meslier, Baron D’Holbach, and Denis Diderot—while the final chapter concerns the state of atheism in France in 1789. Chapter 1 begins with Bayle’s oft-made argument that since moral action stems from the passions rather than principles, it is possible for there to be virtuous atheists. That belief, coupled with his assertion that people should be free to follow their conscience, even if it is wrong, culminates in a doctrine of toleration towards all, including atheists, even under the most extreme of provocations. Chapter 2 examines the atheist system of Meslier, and the “form of radical politics” (63) built thereon, specifically, his call to overthrow the tyranny and domination of both the church and the political rulers in favor of a more egalitarian society. Chapter 3 carefully maps out both the “virtue utilitarian” (117) ethical theory that Holbach derives from his materialist ontology, and his attendant vision of political and legal structures capable of attaining the goal of material well-being for all. Chapter 4 begins with Diderot’s religious journey from deism to skepticism about both theism and atheism, before turning to his political thought, in particular his social contract theory, his push for reforms to promote greater equality, and his desire to subject church to state.

The book is perhaps best characterized as an apology for the aforementioned four apologists of atheism, with Develennes keen to present in a charitable light as possible the different visions of society painted by these apologists (though he does also point out some obvious weaknesses along the way, such as Holbach’s under-motivated belief in natural justice, where virtue and vice are naturally rewarded and punished). As such, it is a successful work, as clear and rich in detail as it is erudite.

In terms of reservations, I shall mention two. First, the title of the book, *Positive Atheism*, is apt to lead a potential reader to think that its focus will be squarely on the active denial of God, which is how the term “positive atheism” is normally understood, as Develennes himself notes early on (7). However, as should be clear enough from the brief account of the first four chapters given above, the focus of the book is more on the social, ethical, and political implications of atheism than it is about the actual rejection of God *per se*. The apparent discrepancy between book title and book content is removed halfway through the introduction, where Develennes explains that he is recasting “positive atheism” as not merely a denial of God “but as a potentially independent mode of thought, seeking self-mastery and autonomy” (12). So construed, it becomes clear why so much space in the book is devoted to the social, ethical, and political thought of the four protagonists named in the title. But of course, one needs to have already started reading the book to know that Develennes is operating with this novel understanding of “positive atheism.” Those who base their expectations of a book’s content on its title might well expect a greater focus on the four protagonists’ actual denial of God than is to be found here.

Devellennes' novel understanding of "positive atheism" also helps to explain his choice of thinkers. He notes early on that of his selected four thinkers, "only two are outright atheists (in the sense that they self-identify as such)" (2), namely Meslier and D'Holbach. The other two, Bayle and Diderot, are included not because they were atheists, or at any rate self-identified as atheists, but because they considered atheism to be a positive doctrine, despite apparently not subscribing to it themselves. This is defensible enough, and I am sympathetic with Devellennes' decision not to impose labels on Bayle and Diderot that they were not willing to place on themselves. However—and this is my second reservation—in the handling of Diderot there is a marked inconsistency which is never adequately explained. In chapter 4, Devellennes argues that while many scholars have portrayed Diderot as an atheist, such a label is inadequate, in that "Diderot remains sceptical of both theistic and atheistic positions throughout his life, and that while he often leans towards atheism, he never quite dismisses some theories about the existence of God" (157). Specifically, Diderot leaves open what Devellennes terms "a hylozoist conception of the universe" (162), in which the material universe is seen as one great living organism, which can be identified as God. Throughout chapter 4, we are told that Diderot returns again and again to this idea, never quite endorsing it, but never once ruling it out either. That, coupled with a lack of explicit self-identification as an atheist, is sufficient for Devellennes to avoid imposing the label of atheist on Diderot. Nothing controversial so far, at least to my mind. Yet in chapter 5, within the space of a single paragraph, Devellennes asserts no fewer than four times that Diderot was an atheist. Hence we find references to "his atheism" (twice), "his own atheism" (once), and the description of Diderot as "an atheist" (all four quotes from 190). After having been told and shown how difficult it is to categorize Diderot's religiosity (or lack thereof), to find it categorized so emphatically as it is in this one paragraph is somewhat jarring.

Needless to say, as reservations go, these are quite minor, and Devellennes' book is overall a fine study of how four 18th century thinkers could envisage atheism as not merely a simple rejection of the divine, but as a coherent worldview in its own right and the source of positive social change.